

Top enlisted chief calls for funding, support

WASHINGTON — The Air Force's top enlisted leader, appearing before the House Appropriations Committee's subcommittee on military construction recently, called for more funding and support of the service's quality-of-life initiatives.

"Our Air Force is comprised of the very brightest men and women America has to offer," said Chief Master Sgt. of the Air Force Jim Finch. "They are true professionals willing to give their lives, if necessary, to accomplish the mission. This level of dedication and commitment deserves a standard of living equal to that of their civilian counterparts."

The Air Force continues to pursue improvements in all quality-of-life priorities, such as adequate manpower, improved workplace environments, fair and competitive compensation and benefits, balanced tempo, safe and affordable housing, enhanced community and family programs, and enriched educational opportunities, he said.

"I truly appreciate the initiatives taken last year (by Congress) to improve the quality of life for our airmen," Finch said. "These were a step forward in our retention efforts which will be realized in the coming years with approximately 193,000 airmen — 69 percent of the active-duty enlisted force — making re-enlistment decisions between fiscal 2001 and fiscal 2004."

Although the service already has experienced stabilization in first-term retention, the re-enlistment rates for second-term and career airmen continue to lag behind goal.

"These are the people — our fully trained airmen and noncommissioned officers — that we need to target," he said.

Given the current state of the national economy, Finch believes that the potential exists for large numbers of these airmen and NCOs to migrate to the private sector unless more quality-of-life improvements are

undertaken.

One of the most visible ways to improve quality of life for our troops is through direct compensation, he said.

"I welcome the projected 4.6-percent across-the-board pay raise; however, I believe we need a targeted pay raise for the enlisted ranks of E-5 through E-9," he said. "As I said earlier, the warning light is on retention of the specific group, and a targeted raise would send a positive message, reinforcing our appreciation for their work and recognizing their important role in today's Air Force."

"We also need to continue to lower the out-of-pocket housing expenses for our airmen," he said. "We need to sustain the (basic allowance for housing) initiative and continue to make incremental increases with the current goal of eliminating out-of-pocket expenses for our troops by FY05."

"There is no doubt that safe, affordable housing for our single and married airmen is vital to readiness and is one of our top quality-of-life issues," Finch said. "And I firmly believe there is a direct correlation between safe, affordable housing and being able to recruit, motivate and retain a top-quality professional force."

The Air Force is striving to meet its current family housing plan, which prioritizes and identifies the resources required to revitalize inadequate housing units, he said.

"However, under current funding levels, we will fall \$2.4 billion short of being able to renovate all the inadequate housing units by the Department of Defense imposed deadline of 2010," Finch said.

There is also an Air Force dormitory plan designed to meet the service's goal of providing single E-1s through E-4s with a private room on base and eliminating the service's worst-condition dormitories by 2009, Finch

said.

"We are on target for this, but this, too, will take continued funding support to make it happen," he said.

The service is committed to providing its members with not only a high-quality living environment, but also an equitable working environment, Finch said.

The Air Force has routinely had to trade off infrastructure and modernization of its facilities to shore up near-term readiness, he said.

"This continued decline in infrastructure funding has led to a steady deterioration of our facilities and, consequently, our readiness may decline over time," Finch said.

"We must continue efforts to improve mission and support facilities," he said. "However, our current real-property maintenance funding levels only allow us to provide day-to-day maintenance of our facilities and infrastructure. This limited funding will result in a backlog exceeding \$5 billion in FY02."

To buy this backlog down by 2010, according to Finch, would require an additional \$1.2 billion per year above the current annual \$1.7 billion Air Force real-property maintenance budget.

"We cannot continue to mortgage the Air Force infrastructure without significant, long-term, negative effects on morale, retention and readiness," the chief said.

"Today, more than ever before, the direct connection between quality-of-life and readiness is clear and indisputable," Finch said. "Our men and women deserve safe, modern and functional places to work, live and play. They also deserve compensation commensurate with their level of professionalism and dedication."

"The enlisted force is the bedrock of our Air Force," he said. "They are definitely our most important resource. How we take care of them today is linked to our readiness tomorrow."

AAFES tests program to remove Social Security numbers from checks

DALLAS — In today's financial climate, where the issue of personal privacy is important, having Social Security numbers on checks is becoming a major concern among shoppers everywhere. Army and Air Force Exchange Service customers are no different and share in the concern that the use of Social Security numbers on checks is an open invitation for identity theft.

In an effort to eliminate the need for Social Security numbers on checks, AAFES set up a three-phase process. The first phase was a pilot "proof-of-concept" test conducted in November 2000 at five military installations, including the AAFES headquarters store in Dallas; the Fort Sam Houston Military Clothing Sales Store, Service Station and Shoppette; the Lackland Air Force Base MCSS and Shoppette; and Autopride in San Antonio, Texas.

Currently, AAFES cashiers enter the sponsor's Social Security number on the check. Under the new system, the Social Security number of the person presenting the check will be entered. This will be accomplished by taking the Social Security number off the presenter's identification card. The Social Security number will not be required on the check. The check will be scanned using technology that reads the routing number, account number and check number.

The testing period for what AAFES calls its "Check Acceptance Test" began early February at the exchanges in San Antonio and is expected to run through late February.

If the program goes as expected, a worldwide rollout is planned to start in early April.

"It is AAFES' policy to take every practical step to ensure the privacy of the servicemembers, retirees and the family members we serve," said Tim Bailey, Chief of AAFES' Management Information Systems Fiscal Support Branch. "AAFES has made this commitment as a part of our mission to better serve our customers throughout the world."

Army News

Defense leaders uphold Army's black beret decision

WASHINGTON— Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz and Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld support the Army's decision to require most soldiers to wear black berets.

Army Chief of Staff Gen. Eric Shinseki announced his intent last October to issue the beret to all soldiers and started a controversy among current and former Army Rangers and in Congress. The black beret has been worn traditionally only by Rangers — an elite, highly trained combat group.

After contention over the decision reached the White House, the president asked the DOD to review the Army's decision and Rumsfeld asked Wolfowitz to look into the matter.

After meeting with Shinseki, the deputy told reporters the headgear change is linked to the Army's plans to transform from a heavy force to a lighter, highly deployable force over the next 10 years.

"As we looked at our transformation of the entire institution," Wolfowitz explained, "we thought it important to

have a symbolic and a visible demonstration that this Army was prepared for change and undertaking it. Switching to the black beret gets this Army moving in the direction that's going to facilitate that change."

Wolfowitz and Shinseki spoke about the decision at a Pentagon news briefing. Wolfowitz said that after hearing the general's explanation, he felt it was important that Shinseki present his view to the American people. As an indication of the public interest in the issue, CNN carried the Pentagon briefing live.

Shinseki said the decision regarding the black beret and the tan beret is "about change."

"The Army will change to remain the most capable and the most respected Army in the world," the general said.

A day earlier, the Army had approved a request allowing its elite Rangers to wear tan berets instead of black, he noted. Special Forces will retain their distinctive green berets. Army airborne soldiers will continue to wear their distinctive maroon berets.